

TANNING—Cont.

Hair-on skins should first be pickled for 24 hours in a solution of salt, alum and acid at the ratio of 1 lb. salt, 1 fluid ounce of commercial sulphuric acid and 1/4 lb. of alum to 1 gallon water. Be very careful with the acid and always put acid into water, never the reverse. The pickling is not absolutely essential, but it may stop the hair slipping on certain skins. In any case, add about 3 ozs. of salt per gallon in the tan bath.

Hair-on and hair-off skins are now both treated in the same way. Put enough water in a barrel to cover the skin and add about a quarter of the liquor from the first boiling. Stir up and immerse the hide. This type of tanning is slow. A sheepskin may take 3 weeks or more to tan. Stir up the solution every day. Every few days take a little of the liquid out of the barrel and replace with an equal amount of concentrated tan liquor. The idea is to gradually increase the strength of the tan over the whole of the tanning period. To tell when the skin is ready to be taken out of the tan, cut a fairly thick part of it; if it is done, it will be brown all through. If it is not ready, there will be a light colored streak in the middle of it. It is difficult to gauge the strength of a tan. The solution used to start the process should be like very weak coffee, and gradually strengthened until near the end of tanning it is like very strong coffee. The color depends on the bark used. If the concentrated liquor is not dark enough, simmer the second copperful until it is reduced by almost half. Always remove the skin when strengthening the tan.

Big cowhides can take up to 2 months or more to tan, depending on the weather. All skins tan faster in warm weather. After they are tanned, remove them from the liquor and allow to drain for an hour out of the sun and wind. Hair-on skins should be wrapped up in brown paper for several days to season. After this, the hair-on skins (and leather after the draining) should be washed on both sides with warm soapy water. You can use a scrubbing brush on the leather. Then rinse in clean water and allow to drain for a few hours.

FOR FINISHING SMALL HAIR-ON SKINS

These may be painted with a light oil such as olive oil and left to dry in the shade. When nearly dry,

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TANNING—Cont.

stretch and pull and work them with your hands to soften them. The flesh side can be smoothed with fine sandpaper.

FOR FINISHING HEAVIER HAIR-ON SKINS

If these are meant for mats or clothing, it pays to stretch them on a frame so they dry flat. While still damp, oil with neatsfoot oil which should be applied warm. As it dries, the skin should be scraped with a blunt knife to keep it soft. It must be stressed that the more you scrape it during drying, the softer it will be. When dry, it may be sandpapered smooth and cut down. Brush or comb the hair or wool.

FOR FINISHING OFF LEATHER

Place over a wide beam, and using an old broom handle, try to smooth all the wrinkles and creases out of the leather. Then oil both sides with neatsfoot oil, tallow or a mixture of equal parts of those two. Rub plenty of oil in. If necessary, oil on two or three successive days. Now stretch or nail out flat and allow to dry slowly. If it is for garments, it should have been stretched on a frame and scraped during the last half of drying until it is very soft. When dry, sand the flesh side and cut out of the frame. Heavier hides can be softened to a large extent by working over a blunt axe head held in a vice. If the skin is still harder than you would like, redampen it and rework it till it is soft enough.

A good frame for stretching and drying skins can be made by nailing together four 4" x 2"s to form a rectangle of approximately 6 ft. by 5 ft. This is the handiest size. Nail angle braces across the corners to hold the shape of the frame. Finally, drive in 3" nails around the frame, leaving them about 1" out, so that you can tie the strings from the skin to them. When stretching the skin, try to get it as flat and evenly "balanced" as possible. To remove excess oil from a tanned skin, rub in hot cornmeal, then dust off.

When tanning, make sure you have a vessel large enough for the skin to fit in without too much folding, as the solution must be in contact with the entire surface of the flesh side. When trimming or shaping hair-on skins, always use a knife, never scissors, and cut from the leather side.

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